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AT THE GOETHE SOCIETY.

BY DION BOUCICAULT.

THE Goethe Society is a club formed by a number of literary and artistic ladies and gentlemen who meet monthly. A suitable hall is hired for each occasion, and some man of letters is invited to address the meeting on a subject with which his name is prominently associated. A dainty supper is provided as an after-piece for members, who, taking their refreshment in informal groups, discuss leisurely the argument of the evening. It is a charming *conversazione panachée*, as the French might call it, and brings together many high spirits in the lightest form.

I was asked to address one of these meetings, and, being allowed to select the subject, proposed "The Influence of the Newspaper Press upon Art."

A distinguished American journalist was invited to make the evening lively by assuming the opposite side of the question and hanging up his shield in this polemical encounter, wherein he defended the virtue of the tenth Muse, which I undertook to question. The president, Mr. Parke Godwin, having "let us go," I took the stand, set my pen in rest, and commenced with a brief history of the brief life of the "Newspaper Press."

It came into existence about one hundred and fifty years ago ; its infancy covered the last century up to 1789, when it rapidly developed into manhood, which it reached about seventy years since, when it assumed the proportions, it very justly claimed, of a fourth estate in the organization of mankind. Previous to 1789, journals of news were insignificant affairs, not bigger than handbills, containing political scandals and squibs, peddling small news ; while the more important matters were dealt with in periodicals, pamphlets, and magazines. Such were the *Spectator*, the *Craftsman*, the *Idler*, the *Gentleman's Magazine*, the *London*

Magazine, and others. But the public appetite for *news*, which the journals contained, soon gave these sheets a particular influence. We find, in 1740, Mr. Danvers complaining that

"The people of Great Britain are governed by a power that was never heard of before as a supreme authority in any age or country. It is the government of the *newspaper press*. The stuff which our weekly newspapers are filled with is received with greater reverence than acts of Parliament, and the sentiments of one of these scribblers have more weight with the multitude than the opinions of the best politician in the kingdom."

Let it be borne in mind that the political and social satires of Addison and Steele, the "Drapier's Letters" of Swift, and the utterances of Bolingbroke, Defoe, and others, had been recognized as legitimate and powerful literary agents; wherefore the above remarks were evidently directed at the "newspaper press" of the period.

Twenty years later, Dr. Johnson is more precise. He writes: "Not many years ago the nation was content with one gazette, but now in the metropolis we have our morning and evening journals, and every large town has its weekly historian." We are justified in concluding, therefore, that the newspaper press, as we employ the term, came into the world at the commencement of the last century.

And here, before going further, let us agree on a definition, that we may not fall into vain discussion over terms. The newspaper press is the daily history of the world and record of the doings of mankind, political, commercial, social, artistic, accompanied by editorial comments on the subjects of passing interest. It is a vehicle for intercourse, whereby the wants of the community are interchanged by way of advertisement. These seem to be the essential things which constitute a newspaper, which contains, therefore, principally *news*. The editorial part, consisting of *opinions*, is, or should be, subsidiary, and should not, perhaps, be properly included amongst the essentials. That this part is disregarded by the public has been frequently and clearly shown, and never more clearly than during the recent Presidential election. The news conveyed by the daily press was faithfully accepted and acted upon, while the united editorial influence of the New York press, with comparatively few exceptions, failed to effect the object in view, and Mr. Cleveland was defeated in his own State. The weekly journals are not newspapers, but belong to the tribe

of pamphlets, essays, periodicals, and magazines. Such were the *Spectator*, the *Craftsman*, the *Idler*, of the last century, which were composed of leading articles ; but the so-called newspapers of that period were such puny affairs that their names survive only in the obscurest corners of our recollection. It may be a question whether a simple sheet of pure news, unadulterated with opinions, would not be welcomed by the greater number of readers, who have little time to wade through the bulky mass that encumbers our attention and interferes with an easy digestion.

It may appear unnecessary to observe that the newspaper could not have existed before the invention of printing. But the Goethe Society accepted very gravely the assurance, impressively uttered by my opponent in the discussion, that newspapers had existed throughout a period of *two thousand five hundred years!* I met this astounding assertion with an appropriate wink, but received no acknowledgement in kind. So I set myself to consider who were the readers of such journals during the middle ages, when amongst the people very few knew how to read,—who were the writers when the clergy enjoyed the monopoly of that accomplishment. Public notices, hand-written, containing certain news, and stuck up in open places by the Government, are not newspapers, the very life of which depends on circulation. They are simply placards, and doubtless were used in Greece, in Egypt, and in Rome, and, for all we know, in Nineveh and in Babylon.

Tracing back to its infancy, it seems very likely that our present journal was the direct outcome of the revolutionary spirit that became manifest in the English revolutions of the seventeenth century, and the American and French revolutions of the eighteenth. Cromwell carried a printing-press at the heels of his army, so that he might keep the people informed of his movements and his progress. Immediately after the popular uprising that lifted James from the throne, the pamphlet press appeared, with Addison, Steele, Swift, Bolingbroke, Pulteney, Defoe, and Smollett, down to the period of Johnson and “Junius.” But it required a new convulsive popular upheaval to bring about another form of engine for the circulation of public opinion. The American Revolution, in 1775, and the French Revolution, fourteen years later, gave birth to the present form of newspaper, when that powerful organization became a

tribune of the people, more potent for the sustenance of law and order than any courts of justice or military force. Kings were to go in dread of it; corporations and all the social and commercial conspiracies that have oppressed the people were on better behavior; politics was its plaything.

I have seen some of the papers issued previous to 1789, and when comparing them with the journals of this day, they are as the old semaphore to the electric telegraph; as the rude steam pump, as Watt found it, compared with the engines of this period; as the hand press is to the monster steam press of Hoe. Let us feel assured that if there had always been newspapers, and readers for them, there would have been no "dark ages." The French Revolution of '89 gave freedom to thought, and made the press, as we have it, possible. And if the Reign of Terror was necessary to deal a mortal blow to the despotism of privileged classes, and to erect the tribune of public opinion, before which monarchs and governments are now obliged to bend their necks, then that hideous period was a blessing, out of which the genius of modern civilization was born and baptized in blood,—as great worldly blessings have always been, since our Saviour suffered on the cross, down to John Brown, who suffered on the gallows.

The advent of the people to power effected a natural change in the world; society lost much of its dignity, both in public and private life. Manners, like dress, were lowered; classes were confused, rather than levelled; there was less refinement, less self-respect, everywhere. But nowhere in the sum total that goes to constitute civilization was there more suffering than in the ornamental arts of literature, painting, and the drama.

It is our present concern to appreciate how far the newspaper press has contributed to this decline; and if the drama be selected as a special example, it is because I know more about this department than any other. Some ten years ago I ventured to express some opinions on this subject in the NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW, and my articles were roughly handled by the journalists of London and Paris; but it was satisfactory to note that no reply was made to the facts composing my argument: their remarks were principally personalities, which went to confirm, rather than to enter any defence to, the indictment.

At first the newspaper began to circulate news only. Press notices of the arts were for the most part *newsy*, not critical.

The persons employed to "do the theatres," or to "do the fine arts," were employés whose duties were those of reporters, and the leading morning journals in London were served in this manner even so lately as 1843. The drama, the opera, and the fine arts were reported for the London *Times* by the clerks attached to its commercial department, or the reporters whose more important offices were to attend flower-shows and public dinners. About this time the *Morning Post* attracted attention by a series of brilliant articles on the theatre and on the Academy, by Mr. Charles Rosenberg. The *Times* and other evening journals awoke to the importance of these matters, and Mr. Oxenford was advanced to the special department of the drama, while Mr. Davison was engaged for musical criticism.

But newspaper criticism of dramatic work is rendered impossible, subjected, as it must be, to the conditions and necessities of the daily press. The performance of a new play or a new opera terminates at or about eleven o'clock. The journalist must have his copy in the hands of the compositor by half-past twelve! Now, within these ninety minutes he should deliver himself of a thoughtful, well-digested essay on what may be an important addition to the literature of the age. It is contended that, whatever practice and experience he may have, it is impossible that he can accomplish the task with justice to the dramatist, to the actors, or to himself. It was suggested that a reporter should undertake the mere detailing of the news—how the dramatic work was received, a description of its plot, and the applause or censure of the public, recorded as a fact; subsequently the journalist should step in, and present his careful and profound study of the play.

But this proposition was rejected by my opponent with contempt. Yet it was thus in France some years ago; it was thus that Jules Janin, Théophile Gautier, Fiorentino, and other brilliant critics sustained the stage. Let it be remembered that there are three component parts in a dramatic exhibition: the author who writes, the actors who represent, and the public that receives and appreciates. Of these three the public is, in the estimation of the artists, the most important. And, indeed, it was so, when it exercised freely its powers of appreciation, and thus brought forward the great dramatists and the great actors, whose lives were ended when the press

undertook to judge for the masses. In fact, it exercises no such universal sway, but the players believe it does ; the dramatists reluctantly are led to believe so, too, for managers are misled by its praise or its censure to encourage or neglect according to its directions or its supposed influence. As a matter of fact, it has never been able to kill a good play, or to injure irremediably a good actor, because its chief power is exerted only during a very brief period, while the play or the actors send forth a bulk of the spectators, night after night, to testify as to their merit. So the temporary impression of the press is overcome; but it does exercise such an influence that a poor entertainment is advertised into a success, and the career of a young artist, who may have some merit, is destroyed by reckless censure or ribald abuse.

When the artist discovered that there was a royal road to fame, and that success might be obtained by cultivating notoriety in type, he said to himself: "Nineteen men out of twenty are fools. I have no use for the twentieth man. The nineteen help themselves to brains out of the newspapers, which are served fresh every morning. They shall serve me interleaved with the newspapers. Advertisement is fame ; advertisement is fortune. The best advertisement is on the editorial page ; instead of paying a dollar a line, let me capture the critic, for his name is 'Boom'."

This state of affairs has demoralized the branch of art with which I am humbly connected, and I am informed that it has in a similar manner demoralized other branches of art, in which even great men aspire to succeed by and through press notices rather than by public appreciation and favor ; or, to speak more correctly, they seek to obtain such public appreciation by favor of the press.

During this century, the arts have declined as the press has pretended to assume authority. During the last fifty years no great dramatists, no great actors, no great composers, no great painters have appeared!—none, at least, that can compare with those that graced the preceding century, from 1740 to 1840. We have none to remain as monuments to mark this present period. The leading actors and actresses are obliged to hark back half a century to find plays of sufficient importance to compose a *répertoire*. Such a desolation is unprecedented in the history of those countries, where great artists have hitherto been produced to adorn

successive ages. I commenced public life in 1841, but my memory reaches back to 1837 or 1838. Between that date and 1842, in the short space of three or four years, I witnessed the production of "The Lady of Lyons," "Richelieu," "Money," "Love's Sacrifice," "Ion," by Talfourd, and "The Bride of Messina," "Love," and "The Love Chase," by Knowles. I omit half a dozen other plays, because they have not held the stage. To the above list I may be allowed to add "London Assurance," "The Irish Heiress," and "Old Heads and Young Hearts." Here we find eleven important dramatic works produced in rapid succession. It seems almost incredible to record that, since that time and during half a century, *not one* dramatic work of similar calibre and importance has been produced and lives! Is it not worth while investigating why this prolific source suddenly became dried up?

At this same period, viz., in 1840, there existed in London companies of comedians occupying the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, and Covent Garden, fully equipped for the performance of the works of the great English dramatists; for example, let us enumerate the actors composing the ordinary company at Covent Garden:

Vandenhoff.

Anderson.

Macready.

Elton.

Waide.

Bennett.

Phelps.

Bartley.

Harley.

Keely.

Webster.

Meadows.

Mrs. Warner.

Helen Faucit.

Mrs. W. Clifford.

Mrs. Orger.

Mrs. Keely.

Miss Fairbrother (now
Duchess of Cambridge).

P. Horton.

Taylor.

These are, all of them, historical names in the drama, all stars of the first magnitude, all grouped in one company. At this moment it would be a difficult task to cast "The School for Scandal," if we searched the whole English-speaking world, Great Britain, the United States, and Australia, to bring into one company artists capable of performing that single comedy even tolerably well. Let it be suggested, rather than asserted, that the invasion of burlesque, so-called comic opera, horse-play extravaganza, spectacle of the prurient kind, negro minstrelsy (indeed,

much of the modern drama appears to me to be negro minstrelsy with white faces), and entertainments of this kind, have absorbed and demoralized our best comedians. Then the polyglot tragedy, the Anglo-Teutonic French drama, has driven the native play into the back-ground.

A French *Hamlet* and a German *Juliet* have introduced new readings of Shakspeare—so to be admired that our own tragic actors and actresses study the foreign inflections of voice and manner! And why not, argued an æsthetic dude the other day, for “‘was not *Hamlet* a Dane and *Juliet* an Italian?” It had not struck me to reconcile matters in that fashion.

It may be asked how the newspaper press is concerned in all this? Is it not the natural growth of things? *On réculé pour mieux sauter!* I confess I do not see the *sauts*—at least, not spelled that way. The press claims to be the organ of public opinion. If, in the monopoly of that function, it has displaced and superseded the select public, the *dilettanti*, that used to stand on guard over a new play or a new actor to censure faults or encourage to further effort; if it has, so to speak, disbanded this gallant troupe, and elected itself to this office, it must accept the responsibilities which seem to me to attach to the exercise of power, and be largely answerable for the results. Has not the lowest, tawdriest kind of entertainment been encouraged? Has not the buffoon been idolized? Has not the tenure of the drama been confirmed to the mountebank? If it be contended that the tide of public taste cannot be stemmed by any forces, but will have its own way, I reply that managers, actors, and authors can be affected by a combined and persistent remonstrance of the press, and if it can combine and persist, the supply of vulgarity, wantonness, and imbecility which now form the staple of public entertainment will be cut off, or so far reduced as to be no longer an abomination and reproach to the age. Maintain the supply, and you create the nuisance you affect to deplore. The leaders of thought, the most eminent pastors of the church, already recognize the value of the stage as a civilizing agent, while the most offensive of its features are subjects of admiration in the columns of the newspapers, to which the manager points when visited by remonstrance, and the actors refer when reproached with their degradation. The stage regards the journalist as its natural enemy. If a favorable notice

appears of some actress, it elicits the remark that she has a friend on the *Herald* ; if an actor be censured, the question is asked, "What have you done to the *World*?" No one dreams that the journalists are writing conscientiously. All this feeling on the part of the artists should not exist.

It would be gratifying to me to state many eloquent things that my opponent said in reply to the above, but he has no wish to put them forward. He accused me of making use of the press when it suited my purposes, which I, impenitent, do acknowledge ; he passed by the facts alleged (excepting the correction as to the foundation of the press, which I was mistaken in dating one hundred and fifty years ago, when it ought to have been two thousand five hundred), and assured us that I was generally mistaken in the views put forward ; that I undervalued the authors and actors of the period, over whom he threw such a floral tribute, and so smothered the question in rhetoric that I am now prepared to admit that Irving's edition of "Faust" throws the "Richelieu" of Bulwer into the shade, and "Paul Pry" cannot compare with the "Brass Monkey."

DION BOUCICAULT.